

OPENING STATEMENT OF DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY  
OF DEFENSE LAURA K. COOPER

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, Members of this Committee,

I appear today to provide facts and answer questions based on my experience as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia. I would first like to describe my background as well as my role and vantage point relevant to your inquiry.

I bring to my daily work and to this proceeding my sense of duty to U.S. national security -- not to any political party. I have proudly served two Democratic and two Republican presidents. I entered government service through the Presidential Management Internship competition, joining the State Department in 1999 to work on counterterrorism in Europe and the former Soviet Union. Inspired by working with the U.S. military on a Department of Defense rotational assignment, I decided to accept a civil service position in the Policy organization of the Office of the Secretary of Defense in January 2001, where I have remained for the past 18 years.

My strong sense of pride in serving my country and dedication to my Pentagon colleagues were cemented in the moments after I felt the Pentagon shake beneath me on September 11, 2001. My office was scheduled to move into the section of the Pentagon that was destroyed in the attack, but a construction delay meant we were still at our old desks in the adjacent section on that devastating day. After we had wiped the black dust from our desks and tried to get back to work, I found meaning by volunteering to work on Afghanistan policy and would give my

next four years to this mission. I later had the opportunity to move into the leadership ranks of my organization and have had the privilege to manage issues ranging from defense strategic planning to homeland defense and mission assurance.

I accepted the position of Principal Director for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia in 2016 and was honored to be appointed formally to the position of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense in 2018. In my current role, I work to advance U.S. national security with a focus on deterring Russian aggression and building strong partnerships with the front line states of Ukraine and Georgia as well as ten other allies and partners from the Balkans to the Caucasus.

Strengthening Ukraine's capacity to defend itself against Russian aggression is central to my team's mission. The United States and our Allies provide Ukraine with security assistance because it is in our national security interest to deter Russian aggression around the world. We also provide security assistance so that Ukraine can negotiate a peace with Russia from a position of strength. The human toll continues to climb in this ongoing war, with 14,000 Ukrainian lives lost since Russia's 2014 invasion. These sacrifices are continually in my mind as I lead DoD efforts to provide vital training and equipment, including defensive lethal assistance, to the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

I have also supported a robust Ukrainian Ministry of Defense program of defense reform to ensure the long-term sustainability of U.S. investments and the transformation of the Ukrainian military from a Soviet model to a NATO-interoperable force. The National Defense Authorization Act requires the Department of Defense to certify defense reform progress to release half of

Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (“USAID”) funds, a provision we find very helpful. Based on recommendations from me and other key DoD advisors, the Department of Defense, in coordination with the Department of State, certified in May 2019 that Ukraine had “taken substantial actions to make defense institutional reforms for the purposes of decreasing corruption, increasing accountability, and sustaining improvements of combat capability,” meriting obligation of the entire \$250 million in USAID funds.

This brings me to the specific topic of these proceedings. I would like to recap my recollection of the timeline in which these events played out. I testified about all of this at length in my deposition.

In July, I became aware of a hold being placed on obligation of State Department’s Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and DoD’s USAID funds. In a series of interagency meetings, I heard that the President had directed the Office of Management and Budget to hold the funds because of his concerns about corruption in Ukraine. Let me say at the outset that I have never discussed this or any other matter with the President and never heard directly from him about this matter.

At a senior level meeting I attended on July 26, chaired by National Security Council leadership, as at all other interagency meetings on this topic of which I was aware, the national security community expressed unanimous support for resuming the funding as in the U.S. national security interest.

At the July 26 meeting there was also a discussion of how Ukrainian anti-corruption efforts were making progress. DoD reiterated what we had said in our

earlier certification to Congress, stating that sufficient progress in defense reform (including anti-corruption) had occurred to justify the USAI spending.

I, and others at the interagency meetings, felt that the matter was particularly urgent because it takes time to obligate that amount of money, and my understanding was that the money was legally required to be obligated by September 30, the end of the fiscal year.

In the ensuing weeks until the hold was released on September 11, I pursued three tracks.

- First, starting on July 31 at an interagency meeting, I made clear to interagency leadership my understanding that once DoD reaches the point at which it does not have sufficient time to obligate all the funding by the end of the fiscal year, there were only two legal ways to discontinue obligation of USAI: a President-directed rescission or a DoD-directed reprogramming action, either of which would need to be notified to Congress. I never heard that either was being pursued.
- Second, I was in communication with the DoD security assistance implementing community to try to understand exactly when they would reach the point at which they would be unable to obligate all the funds by the end of the fiscal year. I received a series of updates, and in a September 5 update, I and other senior Defense Department leaders were informed that over \$100 million could not be obligated by September 30.
- And third, I was advocating for a meeting of the Cabinet level Principals with the President to explain why the assistance should go forward. Although I heard of attempts to discuss the issue with the President, I never

received details about any conversations other than a status update that the hold had not been lifted.

After the decision to release the funds on September 11 of this year, my colleagues across the DoD security assistance enterprise worked tirelessly to be able to ultimately obligate about 86% of the funding by the end of the fiscal year, more than they had originally estimated they would be able to. Due to a provision in September's continuing resolution appropriating an amount equal to the unobligated funds from FY2019 we ultimately will be able to obligate all of the USAI funds. Given how critical these funds are for bolstering Ukraine's security and deterring Russia, I appreciate this Congressional action.

Mr. Chairman, I welcome your questions. I will answer them to the best of my ability. Thank you.